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C O N F I D E N T I A L PARIS 000131

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TAGS: [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [PARM](#) [FR](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: MFA OFFICIAL DOWNPLAYS U.S. CONCERNS REGARDING
POSSIBLE SUB SALES TO VENEZUELA

REF: A. 05 PARIS 8460 AND PREVIOUS

[1](#)B. PARIS 104

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) In a January 5 meeting with Deputy Political Counselor and PolOff (discussion of Bolivia and Colombia ref B), DAS-equivalent for Latin America Michel Pinard downplayed U.S. concerns about rumored discussions regarding the sale of Scorpene submarines to Venezuela. While acknowledging that preliminary talks had begun between Venezuela and unspecified French entities, Pinard stated that the issue was still at a stage of "internal reflection" by the GoF. Venezuela wished to modernize its navy, Pinard said, and the Scorpene was one of the options being explored, but the two sides were a long way from a formal deal.

[1](#)2. (C) Pinard insisted that any potential sale to Venezuela would pose no risk to the U.S. or to regional stability, specifically ruling out a Venezuelan "expansionist doctrine" or designs on Curacao. Pinard underlined that any sale would also incorporate considerations of quality and quantity. On the former, the Scorpene submarine could be equipped in different ways, and the GoF "had no intention of giving Venezuela attack capabilities." As for the second, discussions concerned 2-3 submarines, "but not four." Alluding to worries that such sales could spark an arms race and destabilize the region, Pinard repeated GoF arguments that Chavez was more interested in the submarines to placate military leaders whose allegiance he wished to secure rather than to launch any attack against his neighbors. Referring to GoF interest in cooperation with the Venezuelan navy, Pinard maintained that there were also legitimate counter-narcotics and maritime surveillance needs that new submarines would help meet. In sum, Pinard affirmed, the GoF had heard and understood our concerns, assuring us that France "would never do something that would threaten an ally."

[1](#)3. (C) Comment: Despite his insistence that talks with the Venezuelans are only in the preliminary stages, Pinard's responses to our inquiries seemed aimed at preparing us for the inevitable; in fact, he began by justifying the sales in principle and only later assured us that talks were only beginning. The French strategy appears to be convince themselves, if not others, that their commercial interest in sales of the submarine falls below the threshold of concern to the U.S. and/or other regional players so long as capability and numbers are limited. What they conveniently overlook, of course, is that red-carpet receptions in European capitals and arms sales by allies may only further embolden Chavez. End Comment.

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Hofmann